

Rural Firefighting Forces Harder To Maintain

by JESSICA ROBINSON



Volunteer firefighter Cheyne Anderson of Pend Oreille Fire District 4 waits beside the engine during a training exercise near Newport, Wash. Photo by Jessica Robinson.



Volunteer firefighters and EMS crews from Pend Oreille County practice extricating people from a mock car wreck during a training exercise near Newport, Wash. Photo by Jessica Robinson.



Firefighters in Pend Oreille County, Wash. debrief in the station after a training exercise. Photo by Jessica Robinson.

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NEWPORT, Wash. - When a wildfire breaks out in rural parts of the Northwest, the first people on the scene are often volunteer firefighters. Much of the region relies on these unpaid first responders who have day jobs of their own. But changes in rural America are conspiring to make volunteer forces harder to maintain. And that could make it more difficult for communities to respond to emergencies like wildfire.

Alex Arnold doesn't usually try to make his pager go off. It does it all by itself a couple times a day.

It's the sound that rouses him out of bed and makes him leave parties early — and takes him to scenes like this one.

This is not a real accident. But it looks a lot like one. Volunteer firefighters in Pend Oreille County, Wash., along the border with Idaho, are practicing using the jaws of life to extricate fake victims from an old Ford Thunderbird.

In rural areas, Arnold says volunteer fire departments have to be as well-trained at saving lives as the career guys.

"When you call 911, what are you expecting? Just a big red truck with people on it? Somebody professional is going to show up. And that's the thing here, even though we're volunteers, we are professional firefighters."

I ask him who would respond to those calls if the volunteers weren't here.

"Nobody," he replies.

And "nobody" is what rural fire departments are trying to avoid.

In Pend Oreille County, like in most of the Northwest, there is no paid firefighting force. Phil Stittleburg of the National Fire Protection Association estimates nationwide, 70 percent of firefighters are volunteers.

"That has been our history," he says. "You know, if you call, we come out and try to fix whatever is causing your bad day. Well, we may be approaching a point where the fire service has to say, 'I'm sorry but we don't do that.'"

For one thing, Stittleburg says, states have more training requirements. It's no longer enough to don equipment and rush into a burning building. Firefighters must now log hours on things like EMT classes, hazmat training, and even counterterrorism. And time, Stittleburg points out, is one thing Americans do not have enough of.

"The American workers spends probably more time on their job now than they ever have done."

The number of volunteer firefighters has actually dropped in the last two decades. And rural areas of the Northwest are among the hardest hit because they depend so heavily on unpaid forces.

Washington, Oregon and Idaho have been running a series of recruiting ads.

Some fire officials attribute the difficulties in attracting young recruits to a faltering sense of community. But there may be another, more quantifiable phenomenon at work.

Lena Etuk, a social demographer at Oregon State University, says in general the population of the United States is aging.

"But what's interesting," she says, "is that in rural area, that increase in age is actually at a larger rate than in urban areas, so rural areas are just aging faster."

That means, there are fewer of the sort of strapping young types that join fire departments.

"The youngest guy in my department, in my station here is probably 42," says Dennis Weaver, a 73-year-old volunteer firefighter in Ola, Idaho.

In 2007, he lost a good friend to one of the leading causes of death for volunteer firefighters: Heart attack.

"All firefighters worry about the danger of the job," Weaver says. "And you try to be careful. You know in our area here, we don't much choice because we haven't got many young people."

Even as the median age of volunteer firefighters rises, some departments in the Northwest are starting to turn things around. They're using incentives like allowing students to live at the fire station so they can save on rent. They can also get a tuition credit in exchange for volunteering. Some fire departments offer deals through the local electricity company that give volunteers discounts on their utility bills.

And then, there are people like Missy Adrian. She didn't need any of that to get her to the fire house. Adrian is a 19-year-old volunteer firefighter and EMT from Elk, Wash.

"Oh, just saving someone's life, I mean, once you've done that, it's definitely worthwhile," she says. "There's no question about that. You're really making a difference."

It turns out, the new generation of volunteer firefighters may be in it for pretty much the same reasons as the old generation.

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On the Web:

Washington State Fire Fighters Association

<http://wsffa.org/wsffa/>

Oregon Volunteer Firefighters Association

<http://ovfa.org/>

Idaho Volunteer Fire & Emergency Services Association

<http://ivfesa.org/>